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# Modifications vs. Modernization: Korean Gayageum in the 20th Century

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Modifications vs. Modernization:  
*Korean Gayageum in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
Honors in the Department of Asian Studies

Union College  
June, 2013

## ABSTRACT

SHEEN, SOUN    Modification vs. Modernization: Korean *Gayageum* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.  
Department of Asian Studies, June 2013.

ADVISOR: Professor Jennifer Matsue

After the period of Japanese colonization and the Korean War in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Korea rapidly adapted to Western influences as it recovered from the nationwide political and economic turbulence. As Western culture quickly traditional Korean cultures, Korean recognized the importance to conserve their authentic characteristics. Music played an important role during this cultural revival/ Korean musicians began to internalize the imported Western music to create a new traditional music, through which Korea sought to re-establish its national identities. However, this manipulation of traditional music to conform to the Westernizing society has led to dilution of the unique musical qualities reflecting the original works of Korea. 25-stringed Korean zither, *gayageum*, is often used as a *failed* revival of the traditional music due to the loss of the traditional qualities of *gayageum*. Instead of applying Western values to suit the instrument, *gayageum* has been extensively modified in order to employ Western musical elements. This thesis will explore the history of Korean music and the hybridization of Western and the Korean traditional music that has created the new traditional music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

An immense sense of national pride dominates Korea – the nation’s effort to strengthen and preserve its national identity can be observed in many aspect of the culture. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Korea suffered through the Japanese colonization period, the Korean War and the successive U.S. occupation followed by nationwide political and economical turbulence, all of which left Korea extremely vulnerable to the Western influences. As Korea rapidly adapted to the Western influences, Koreans recognized the importance to conserve their authentic characteristics. This idea of cultural revival attracted many people, including the nation’s renowned traditional musicians, who sought to establish national identities to distinguish Korea from other modernizing Asian countries through its traditional music.

Internalizing, rather than merely adopting imported musical values, Korean musicians have created a “new traditional music” that reflects the qualities and sensibilities of the original works of Korea (Kim, 2011). Since Western influence had overwhelmingly dominated Korea’s musical arena since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was impractical to replace Western music with traditional Korean music. Therefore, musicians have reorganized Western musical elements and thoroughly reinterpreted the traditional Korean musical aspects in order to hybridize Korean and Western music. The new traditional music defined by this idea of hybridization has received a lot of credit for effectively reviving the traditional values while internalizing Western music, to which people’s ears have been adjusted. However, the manipulation of traditional music to conform to the Westernizing society has also led to dilution of the unique musical abilities of traditional Korean music, as seen in the Korean traditional zither, *gayageum*. The original instrumental and musical features of *gayageum* were lost during the course of modernization in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the instrument was modified in ways that ultimately led to the new 25-string *gayageum* that failed to capture the very characteristics that define the instrument.

### Background Information – Korean Music in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:

Since gayageum shares a significantly distinct history from other instruments or musical genres, which will be discussed later, it is important to know the history of Korean music in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Traditional music of Korea could have easily disappeared during the Japanese and American occupation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, Korean music still remains diverse and lively today. Historically referred to as a juncture between the musical cultures of China and Japan, the earlier Korean court music had been significantly influenced by Chinese repertoires and instruments (Lee, 2007). However, since the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, under the decree of King Sejong, Korea successfully developed unique aesthetic concepts that distinctly identify its music from that of surrounding countries. King Sejong, dedicated to expanding “the realm of possibility” for all musicians of Korea, introduced a new notational system, *jeongganbo*, to compensate for previous systems that could not present complex rhythms (Kim, 2010). Displaying both the pitches and lengths of notes, *jeongganbo* not only encouraged musicians to compose novel pieces to dilute Chinese influences in the royal court music, but also promoted more varieties of folk music to serve the musical interests of people across different social classes (Jackson, 2009). This new notational system made it possible to protect the original elements of Korean music from increasing foreign influences and transmit the traditional values up to the present day.

However, as Korea faced increasing foreign influence since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century under the Japanese and American occupation, the permeation of Western influence was evident. Korea was officially occupied by Japan in 1910; the Japanese sought to project their superior modernity by imposing Western values on Korea. Harshly repressed under the “Nation Obliteration Policy,” Korean traditional musicians were forced to accept the Japanese rules and eschew traditional music (HJ Kim, 2009). Ironically, it was a Japanese acoustics specialist, believing that the music

of Korea was “music from heaven,” and thus should be preserved, who established the school for traditional and modern music during the Japanese occupation (Connor, pg. 289). Despite the effort, Koreans were limited to simple Western-style propaganda songs during the Japanese colonization; virtually all aspects of traditional Korean identities were suppressed (HJ Kim, 2009).

After Korea’s independence in 1945, many composers attempted to express aspects of Korean traditional music in their work, promoting the reintroduction of Korean music to the Koreans after the thirty five years of extreme cultural repression (Kim et al, 2003). However, the process was extremely difficult as Korea was divided into groups of conflicting ideologies. The nation was in a politically chaotic state as both communists and democrats fought for control, which eventually resulted in the Korean War in 1950 (Connor, pg. 285). Left devastated after the war, South Korea (*although North and South Korea share common music, this paper will only refer to South Korea*) concentrated on national reunification and establishment of a self-supporting economy; the development of cultural and musical identities was not the top priority when people were starving in the streets. Nonetheless, while traditional music remained rather stagnant, Western music became ingrained in the society – Western melodies were used in the patriotic songs to lift the spirits of people of Korea and as the basis of Korean popular music (Connor, pg. 291). Indeed, until the late 1960’s, music in post-war Korea was almost entirely shaped by the Western values; Korean society was “apathetic or even intolerant” towards any traditional activities (Hesselink, pg. 106). After neglecting traditional music for almost two decades, Koreans finally realized the critical influence of music in defining a national identity, and sought to “Koreanize” imported music to create a “new traditional music” that reflected Korean sensibilities (Kim, 2011).

In 1969, under the slogan “Our Music, by Our Hands,” Korea finally began the search for its musical identity that had long been oppressed under the Japanese colonial rule, successive Korean war, and political and social turbulence (Kim, 2011). Since Western music had surpassed traditional music in stature, hybridization of Korean and Western music was necessary in order to attract the younger generations heavily influenced by Western elements (Kim, 2009). The internalization of Western styles within Korean music successfully reintroduced authentic Korean qualities, ultimately resulting in a new genre: contemporary Korean traditional music, *guk-ak*. Literally meaning national music, the term *guk-ak* portrays Korea’s effort and desire to restore its national identity in the realm of Japanese and Western influences. Musicians of the elder generation, who initially sought to revive original Korean music in its ancient form, condemned the idea of hybridization and believed that the new genre represented a radically different culture (Kim, 2011). However, they soon acknowledge the hybrid as a new musical legacy of their own, and approached the idea of “intentional hybrid” by searching for common interests between their original works and the new music (Kim, 2011; Hesselink, pg. 107). The narrowed gap between the ancient and contemporary Korean traditional music further promoted the use of traditional music in modern settings, which has provided a rich variety of traditional musical activities in Korea (Lee, 2007).

For example, Korea’s *samulnori*, which is a modernized adaption of traditional rural drumming and dancing performance called *poong-mul*, has successfully re-established traditional music in modern Korean society by re-interpreting the ritual aspects of *poong-mul* to appeal to Korean audiences used to Western-style. *Samulnori*, re-establishing the identity of *poong-mul* as entertainment music celebrated globally, presents the characteristics of this Korean traditional percussion performance in modern settings without making any modifications on the traditional

rhythms, instruments, or playing techniques (Hesselink, 2004). In fact, this preservation of the most salient elements that define the original genre distinguishes *samulnori* from modernized *gayageum*, which does not demonstrate any traditional aspects of *gayageum*.

### History of Gayageum:

*Gayageum*, a traditional Korean zither composed of a sound box and twelve strings, was developed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century under King Gaya of the Gaya confederacy (Hwang, 2010). The first *gayageum* introduced, *jeong-ak gayageum*, was exclusively played for palace nobility; the term *jeong-ak* refers to the court music. Mostly used as an accompaniment in orchestral court music, *jeong-ak gayageum* did not play a significant role in Korean traditional music until late 19<sup>th</sup> century when it was modified into *sanjo gayageum*. The latter gained its name from the musical genre believed to have evolved with the instrument (Kim, 2009). Korean music rapidly shaped its distinct musical identities since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, musicians sought to encourage the use of *gayageum* in an attempt to produce a zither that exclusively represented Korea (Hwang, 2010). The original *jeong-ak gayageum*, however, was not suited to play faster peasant music; therefore, musicians narrowed the spacing between the strings and reduced the overall body size (Hwang, 2010). The slight structural modification from *jeong-ak* to *sanjo gayageum* allowed instrumentalists to develop varying techniques to better accommodate faster compositions. An expanded range of playing technique developed on *sanjo gayageum* also produced more expressive sound qualities.

The identity of *gayageum* can be further defined by its two major symbolic qualities: *yeo-eum* and *nong-hyun* (Kim, 2008). Referring to the rich resonating sound after a plucking of a string that fills up the empty space between the notes, *yeo-eum* was especially pronounced in



slower *jeong-ak* pieces. *Nong-hyun*, similar to Western vibrato technique, is produced by manipulation of the string with the left hand. While the right hand is used for producing the notes, the left hand is used for various types of movements on the string to manipulate pitches and produce different timbre qualities. The introduction of finger variations, such as double flicks, pushing, and the middle and ring plucks, essentially marks the musical transition from *jeong-ak* to *sanjo gayageum* (Kim, 2008).

The faster passagework and different timbre qualities on *sanjo gayageum* encouraged musicians of all class to further incorporate *gayageum* into their musical work (Hwang, 2010). Since the introduction of *sanjo gayageum* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, *gayageum* had widely spread among musicians, and ultimately led to the development of a new instrumental folk genre, *sanjo*. A set of movements based on rhythmic patterns, *sanjo*, is a loosely organized improvisational melody (Kim, 2009). This improvisational nature of *sanjo* promised performers a better expression of individual emotion and passion without being restricted by a certain set of musical parameters. With the development of *sanjo gayageum* and *sanjo* music, *gayageum* successfully established itself as a solo melodic instrument distinct from an accompanying instrument in court music in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, prior to the Japanese colonial period.

Upon the official occupation of Korea, the Japanese banned Korean musical instruments, including *jeong-ak* and *sanjo gayageum*. Although the use of nearly all Korean instruments was strictly oppressed during the colonial period, *gayageum* had taken a peculiar path –the practice of *sanjo gayageum* was permitted in the 1920's. The Japanese, condemned by the United States for its brutal restrictive policies, allowed a level of nationalistic activities in Korea as a response to the criticism (Miller, 2005). *Jeong-ak gayageum* was still abandoned since it directly represented the Chosun court music (Hwang, 2010). *Sanjo gayageum* did remain popular during the time;

however, the Japanese specifically localized the instrument to *gibang*, the ‘entertainment house’ where the low-class female musicians serve male literati musically, and sometimes sexually. Furthermore, the Japanese slightly modified the Korean *sanjo gayageum* into the ‘Japanized *gayageum*,’ which was decorated with the national flower of Japan, *sakura*, and reduced in size to imply that only the female performers of *gibang* should play the instrument. The purpose of modification was not to change the musical characters, but to simply “Japanize” a Korean instrument (Miller, 2005). Many *gayageum* performers, particularly the males, strongly rejected to embrace the degraded status of the instrument.

After Korea’s independence from Japan, many earlier musicians attempted to restore their respective musical genres. However, many of the traditional performers refused to practice *gayageum* since it not only symbolized *gibang*, but also its musical identity had been tainted by Japanese and Western influence. For nearly two decades, until the nationwide movement to bring back traditional music, *gayageum* was practiced by only a handful of traditional instrumentalists who sought to preserve its original qualities. Under the nationwide movement to support traditional music in the late 1960’s, *gayageum* slowly implemented the idea of intentional hybridity on *gayageum* to revive its popularity and re-establish its status. Unlike musicians of other musical genres who were dedicated to restoring their original works in modernizing contexts, *gayageum* performers primarily focused on rebuilding their degraded reputation (Hwang, 2010).

#### Evolution of *Gayageum*:

The modernization of *gayageum* was largely based on the idea of hybridizing the elements of *sanjo gayageum* and Western musical principles in order to successfully present the

traditional value to the public heavily influenced by Western music. By the time, *sanjo gayageum* had become a new traditional *gayageum* since it better represented Korea as a whole, while *jeong-ak gayageum* was the symbol of the upper-class or court music. Furthermore, *jeong-ak gayageum* was rarely seen after the Japanese occupation. Although the earlier instrumentalists were worried that hybridization would repress the unique characteristics of *gayageum*, it was unavoidable as all aspects of music in Korea had become westernized, including compositional techniques, teaching style, and distribution methods. Developing Korean-Western pieces for *gayageum*, composers exploited a greater expressive range they perceived in the Western notation system. Despite the initial goal to retain a strong reflection of traditional music, composers claimed that instrumental revisions to enhance the small volume capacity and narrow pitch range of *sanjo gayageum* were necessary to accommodate the new Korean-Western music (Byeon, 2007). In mid 1960's, instrumentalists simply increased the number of strings in effort to expand the range without changing the structure or sound qualities, creating 13-,14-, and 15-string *gayageum*. However, composers were not satisfied and continued to complain that *gayageum*'s limited ability held them back from "unrestricted inspiration and mature musicality" of Western music to express a wider range of musical language (Lee, 2007). Composers and performers lamented that "no traditional Korean instrument could match Western instruments" (Byeon, 2007).

As development of a new Korean-Western genre for *gayageum* proceeded, the limit of the original pentatonic *gayageum* was evident. The traditional pentatonic scale was not suitable for Western harmony, and performers had to manipulate the strings with their left hands to produce the correct pitch. Due to this complication, not only Western melodies sounded strange on the traditional *gayageum*, but also the overall tempo of the piece was often delayed (Byeon,

2007). The musicians believed that the simple structural modifications were inadequate; instead, they believed that *gayageum* itself had to be modernized, based on Western musical elements, in order to play the new music. This idea of instrumental modernization ultimately led to the development of heptatonic 21- and 25-string *gayageum*, in 1985 and 1998, respectively (Hwang, 2010). A widened range of notes allowed performers to play faster moving pieces and produce clear pitches. The adoption of Western elements accelerated with the introduction of heptatonic *gayageum*, and compositions increasingly reflected Western music.

Although the original purpose of intentional hybridity was to revive *gayageum* and escape the “stranglehold of Western music,” *gayageum*’s identity was significantly tainted with Western music (Byeon, 2007). The modernized *gayageum* was no longer functional to play the traditional music, and the contemporary pieces for such *gayageum* merely employments of Western harmony into the instrument. The modernization of *gayageum* also changed its musical presentation. Performers, instead of sitting on the floor with the instruments on their laps, sat on chairs with the instruments on a stand, and no longer restricted their dress to *hanbok*, Korean traditional dress. In fact, today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the 25-string modernized *gayageum* is mostly only used to play Western pieces while traditional *jeong-ak* or *sanjo gayageum* is used to resemble the music of Korea.

### Conclusion:

The initial plan to slightly add Western color to *gayageum* to restore its popularity and status, has completely changed over the course of the modernization of *gayageum*. The focus of the process has shifted from reviving *gayageum* and its music to adopting Western music through the process. Instead of applying Western values to suit the original instrument, *gayageum* has

been manipulated in order to employ Western musical elements. Heptatonic modernized *gayageum*, with its range of pitch similar to the piano and the greater volume to fill Western-style concert halls, has been “imbued with confusion about its identity based on its combination of Western and Korean music cultures” (Lee, 2007). In fact, the term combination Lee uses here can be misleading since the new music rather eliminated the traditional features of *gayageum* and virtually created a new type of zither.

As seen in the transition from *jeong-ak* to *sanjo gayageum*, structural changes on the instrument were unavoidable in order to better accommodate the new Korean-Western hybrid music. However, the modification of *gayageum* in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was beyond enhancing structure and ultimately led to musical changes. For example, the expanded pitch range of 21- and 25- stringed *gayageum* eventually transformed the timbre quality of the instrument. With the increased number of notes, the left-hand was rarely involved in producing a pitch by pushing down the string. The signature left-hand embellishments of *jeong-ak* and *sanjo gayageum* disappeared as it merely assisted the right-hand in playing Western melodies. The music of the traditional *gayageum* varied largely based on the individual left-hand technique; this improvisation nature of *gayageum* marked by technique and sentimental flows of the individual performer gradually disappeared (Shin, 2007). The contemporary Westernized Korean *gayageum*, emphasizing logical ideas for music structure and melodic progression rather than on the individual performer’s personal styles and sensibilities, seems dull.

The first modification on *gayageum* was made more than thousand years after its debut in the 6<sup>th</sup> century; however, the instrument has undergone many changes in a few decades after the Japanese occupation. The multiple modified variations of *gayageum* introduced in just a few decades in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century imply the difficulty in accommodating a new style of music on a

melodic instrument. Since the original gayageum was created specifically based on the traditional Korean pentatonic scale, it was not suit to play Western melodies with different scales of pitches. On the other hand, Western rhythms can be played on the traditional percussion instruments used in samulnori without modifying the instrumental structures. As mentioned earlier, the purpose of the hybridization of gayageum was to restore the reputation and popularity of the instrument by appealing to audiences used to Western music. Hence, in order to play Western melodies, the dramatic modifications were made to gayageum, which ultimately led to the modern 25-string gayageum that no longer represent the unique qualities of Korean traditional music. Unfortunately, the original elements that define the instrument and distinguished it from other different types of zither in East Asia have disappeared.

Instead of lamenting the loss of the authentic features of gayageum, musicians should now focus on the development of the original gayageums, jeong-ak and sanjo, to further promote the very beauty of gayageum.

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